Response to

D. Wall

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To the Editor:

Please accept this letter in reference to the article “Reappraisal, Deaccessioning, and Accountability: When ‘Doing the Best We Can’ is not Good Enough” 2:2 (February/March 2010) by Darren Wall. I began reading the article with great interest, but became increasingly disappointed as I went on. The weaknesses in Mr. Wall’s research and analysis became ever-more clear and fundamental, a particular shame because, as he notes correctly, reappraisal and deaccessioning are topics still under-discussed in archival literature.

However, the topics are not as under-studied as he suggests. In fact he omits reference to no fewer than ten articles and masters’ theses on the subjects of reappraisal and deaccessioning, covering a period of 1984-2006. I know this both because I have compiled a bibliography on the subjects for the Society of American Archivists’ “Advanced Appraisal” workshop (I both developed and teach it), and because I am the author of two of the ten articles (in 2002 and 2006).1 Making use of these pieces would probably have added some of the missing nuance in Mr. Wall’s article.

I confess complete ignorance of the “Paper Caper” at the center of the article, but would like to offer some observations based on what Mr. Wall presented. First, we are given no information about reasons for the reappraisal/deaccessioning of the material in question by the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador beyond reference to poor condition—was this the sole reason? We are also not provided with information concerning the arrangement and description of the 20 boxes of material in question—what proportion did the apparently important shipwreck and mummering material represent; was this material clearly labeled; was it fragmentary or coherent; was it largely

1 I also designed and directed an NHPRC-supported reappraisal and deaccessioning project at my current institution that resulted in reappraising nearly 500 collections and the deaccessioning of some 15,000 cubic feet of material. That effort is reported briefly as part of Mark A. Greene, “I’ve Deaccessioned and Live to Tell About It: Confessions of an Unrepentant Reappraiser,” Archival Issues, 30:1 (2006), 7-22. My institution’s report on the project to our funding agency is also available, at http://ahc.uwyo.edu/documents/about/grants/NHPRC_grant/NAR06_second_half.pdf. A more thorough report of the reappraisal project, written by D. Claudia Thompson and Laura Uglean Jackson, has been accepted for publication in American Archivist.
duplicated in other record series at the provincial or federal level?

All these are questions that should be asked and answered if one is going to judge a reappraisal/deaccession decision after the fact. The evidence Mr. Wall presents for damning the decision of the Provincial Archives is that the 20 boxes were a) appraised to be worth $200k; b) of sufficient interest that the Memorial University of Newfoundland was willing to pay $120k for them; c) in the end the Provincial Archives reacquired the boxes and is making them publicly accessible.

But we should all know that monetary appraisals frequently are out of sync with archival appraisals. I know from much experience that even archival repositories are sometimes willing to pay extraordinary sums for primary sources that appear to other archivists as not worth a fraction of the price. And under the political pressure that developed it should hardly be any wonder that the Provincial Archives agreed to reclaim the material; this is not to say the archivists there were truly convinced they had made a mistake with their original decision.

As for the wisdom of deciding originally to have the material shredded, while it is true other options exist in the abstract, we do not know from Mr. Wall's article anything about the Provincial Archives' collection management policies governing deaccession or about any conditions/obstacles to other courses of action. Nor does Mr. Wall appear to have followed-up on the possibility that some or all of the records had been filmed; to say "there is an inherent value in the idea of the original, especially if one considers the exhibit value" (p. 6) is much too facile without a better understanding of the Provincial Archives overall resources, including stack and exhibit space.

Finally, I would contend that Mr. Wall is simply incorrect to declare that "when considering the reappraisal [decision of the Provincial Archives] one should also simultaneously be considering the possible deaccessioning options…. The options for deaccessioning should have a bearing on the reappraisal process" (p. 10). Rather, the opposite should be true: the decision as to whether the records continue to warrant preservation by the repository should be completely independent of the decision concerning disposition. Why? Because otherwise repositories will be strongly tempted to abjure justifiable reappraisal solely because the only viable alternative after deaccessioning seems to be shredding.

And too many archivists cannot bring themselves to destroy archival material, regardless of their suitability for the archivists’ particular repository. As Tim Ericson observed many years ago (“At the ‘Rim of Creative Dissatisfaction’: Archivists and Acquisition Development,” *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92, p. 69), “…our instinct is still to see ourselves in the role of a twentieth-century Horatius-at-the-Bridge: the last line of defence between preservation and oblivion. This causes us to make utterly ludicrous decisions regarding acquisition by cloaking ourselves in the virtue of maintaining culture: If I don't save it, who will?...”
The cruel fact of the matter is that given real limits on repository resources, obstacles to transfer or sale, and reasoned if arguable judgments by the archivists in the line of fire, not everything of value to someone can or ought to be saved. And the even crueler fact is that sometimes denying another repository the chance to “waste” (a subjective assessment, of course) astonishingly large amounts of resources (whether cash or other) to acquire a collection your repository just reappraised and deaccessioned might be considered an appropriate decision taking the broader archival enterprise into consideration.

In the end, I fear that Mr. Wall has not succeeded in his goal that “through examination and discussion, a new process of thought and application may be applied when encountering these issues” (p. 1). Had he provided a more thorough and detailed setting of context (both the context of the incident and the context of professional literature), asked and answered the range of questions an experienced appraisal archivist should pose about a reappraisal and deaccession decision, and been less swayed by the debatable importance of the monetary assessment, he might have provided a much sounder contribution to the reappraisal/deaccessioning debate.

Sincerely,

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